

Our Botanic Gardens and the Jamaican Experience

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As a result of an email I sent over the internet about the state of our Botanic Gardens, the only public green space of significance in Roseau, I received several responses essentially expressing indignation at the deterioration of the Gardens, and concern about its possible destruction. The instances referenced included the abandonment of the Back (the old economic crops section), putting unnecessary buildings at the Back (that could be less destructively accommodated elsewhere), ditto an unneeded infant school now transformed to a Health Services center, plus the general appropriation of Gardens space for housing incidental offices that could be located elsewhere (including CARDI, IICA, Frog Research), destruction of the Gardens wall, and rumored plans to put a highway through the Back, which the Government's Gardens Master Plan of 2006 by Scribal Consultants said was "riddled with problems of a civil engineering nature."

With specific reference to the wall, questions raised included - If space was needed for simple road widening, where is the widened road going to? If a parking lot, are there not better alternatives, such as a parking structure somewhere on the east side of the road? Or is this widened road the beginning of the highway to New Town via the Back - a Ring Road, and/or the final onslaught on the Gardens itself by profiteers for a housing scheme? In short, what are the specifics of Government's plans for the Gardens, this major social, educational and economic asset of the Nation?

One of the responses to the email sent earlier was quite instructive. It concerned the Jamaican experience with its Hope Botanical Gardens. These Gardens are located just outside Kingston, similar in location to our Dominica Botanic Gardens, though they are much larger than ours, 200 acres vs. our 40. The note observed that Hope Gardens was under similar attack a few years ago as our Gardens is today.

The writer pointed out, and I confirmed the essentials, that Hope Gardens had deteriorated, not unlike the deterioration in the economic crops section (The Back) of our Gardens. Seeing this deterioration (fortuitous or planned), in 1991, the Government of Jamaica decided to sell a part of Hope Gardens to a group of investors who planned to buy the land at a modest price and develop it as a private, for-profit housing estate. However, as a result of strong public outcry and representation by right-thinking leaders of the Jamaican community, that project was shelved, at that time.

Subsequently, another housing project for the same area re-emerged in 1999 as the Hope Country Club Scheme, with the same strategy -- buy from government at a minimum price and develop at a hefty profit -- and the same investors, except there was a new addition, the Minister of Housing. Again, despite the objection of the Housing Minister, strong opposition from an enlightened public-- including some of Jamaica's most senior barristers like Dr Lloyd Barnett QC and Vivian Blake QC, and some of its most reputable journalists, like John Maxwell

CD -- convinced PM Patterson to put an end to that housing scheme. In 2000 it was stopped, hopefully permanently.

The Jamaican experience is both ominous and instructive -- for one, it came back with stronger partisans - the Jamaican Minister of Housing had now been co-opted as one of the proponents of the housing scheme. For our own Gardens, if we do not put a legal stop to this chopping up and wanton building in our Gardens, we may well lose the Gardens, and get to know this after the fact, like the wall. I am therefore appealing to **PM Skerrit** and **President Liverpool** to intercede and put a stop to these ill-conceived activities in the Gardens, taking place on their watch. Further, I am appealing to both of these leaders to clarify Government's plans for the Gardens. This is a major social, educational and economic asset of the Nation, and fully informing the public of these plans is the right thing to do, and the duty of our leaders.

But to our people in general, especially those like the tour bus operators who make a living by taking visitors to the Gardens, and horticulturalists and others who see the aesthetic and environmental potential of our Gardens, we need to take a stand for the preservation of our Gardens, as the Jamaicans did for their Hope Gardens.

Everywhere, people are protecting and preserving their Botanic Gardens, but we in Dominica want to destroy ours. If we don't preserve our Gardens, history will neither forget nor absolve us. And as a people, on our epitaphs will be written, "The colonials left you a gem, and you destroyed it."

The Sun Newspaper
Roseau, Dominica
August 17, 2009